

Tagore and Gandhi: Their intellectual conflict and companionship

It is always rewarding for a Bengali brought up on a staple diet of Tagore to bring Gandhi into the discussion and speak about their central philosophical questions regarding a desirable society and a concrete and universal humanism: questions that have defined Indian public life and contemporary world ideas.

These two great thinkers of modern India had their strong differences and; intellectual conflicts but at the same time both realized their deep affection for each other.

The ideas of Tagore are a part of my life. For many years I thought of Gandhi as a strange phenomenon, vending ideas that looked terribly eighteenth century: speaking against the British parliament, law courts and even railways. But in due course I realized that Gandhi – in his book ‘Hind Swaraj’ written in 1909 took the sort of extreme position which a great poet or a visionary is capable of taking. The poet William Blake once said that all extremes open the gates of heaven. Truth is not revealed with liberal views, but with extreme views. As a critique of the planned agenda of the

British of civilizing Indians and modernizing India, Gandhi decided to deglamorize his opponents by criticizing all the icons of Western civilization and said that India is in danger of losing her soul. She must resist it for her own sake and that of the world. Gandhi's approach was not to create a tussle between the indigenous and the foreign but to warn us about the danger of developing a colonial mentality or mental colonization. Tagore also said in those days that true modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste; it is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters. Today I see the ideas of Mahatma as well as of Tagore as true bridges to the future.

Emotionally, I live in Tagore's world but intellectually, I recognize that the twenty-first century belongs to Gandhi. Tagore is for all time; he cannot be limited within the ambit of a century. For two decades after he received the Nobel Prize he flashed across the Western sky like a comet. It was the second decade of the last century and Rabindranath Tagore was already beginning to make an international presence. His works were translated into French by Andre Gide, and into Russian by Boris Pasternak, both Nobel prize winners; W.B. Yeats, another Nobel laureate, had written the preface to the first edition of Tagore's own

translation of the Gitanjali in 1912 and Ezra Pound in a revised edition in 1913 compared him to Dante. Meanwhile twenty two of Tagore's titles had already been translated in 1917 into immaculate Spanish, mainly through the pen of the Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jiminez, who later won the Nobel Prize in 1956, and his wife, Zenobia Camprubi who was an American. The French Nobel laureate, St. John Perse said of Tagore that he lived his poem and lived it integrally with all the integrity of man and of life.

In due course, like a comet he disappeared but reappeared in the 1960s when the children of neo-romantics like Aane Akhmatova and Donald S. Harrington and others found in him a sympathetic voice. They responded in particular to his messages of

- 1) anti- materialism,
 - 2) his vision of the spiritual, and
 - 3) his search for beauty in man and nature
- which were very familiar to them. They were also attracted by his late poetry which became less and less like poetry, and more and more like the unadorned human voice describing his journey towards greater and greater honesty.

The comet again disappeared for a short while to be brought back to the sky by a young English modernist poet, William Radice, who translated Tagore's poetry from original Bengali and shattered the myth of Tagore as just a mystical poet of the East. Radice's work marked a new initiative in the European understanding of Tagore. Not only lovers of literature but social and political scientists and thinkers from different fields of human knowledge took great interest in Tagore's ideas of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, new education and the changing nature of violence, and its bureaucratization and also took notice of his notion of unity of mankind.

Let me quote two distinguished thinkers; first, a social and political theorist, Isaiah Berlin, who believed in counter-Enlightenment and advocated an irreducibly pluralist ethical ontology, saw the value in Tagore's unique position and said many years ago in his well known book 'Sense of Reality' that Indians ought to be proud of the rarest of all gifts of nature, a poet of genius, who even in moment of acute crisis....unwaveringly told them only what he saw, only the truth.

The second comes from the all together different field of Chemistry. Ilya Prigogine, a 1984 Chemistry Nobel Laureate, went so far as to say in the same year that curiously enough,

the present evolution of science is running in the direction stated by the great Indian poet, Tagore.

Gandhi was different. It was Ashis Nandi, who once remarked, as is recorded in his book, 'Talking India' that there are four Gandhis who survived after Gandhi's death in 1948:

The first Gandhi is that of the Indian State and the second that of the Gandhians. The third Gandhi is that of the eccentrics and the fourth is the Gandhi who is basically not read but only heard of almost as a rumour.

Ashis Nandi says that this latter Gandhi survives in odd places – in people like Dalai Lama or Aung San Su Kyi or Nelson Mandela or even survives in movements of various kinds, in say, anti-nuclear or environmental movements, and, this is my addition, in Bollywood films - to the utter discomfiture and chagrin of the Indian elite.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was an ordinary common man with extraordinary convictions, who sold his wife's jewellery to study law in London, returned a barrister but because of his moral uprightness and poor articulation could not become successful in his profession and like thousands of poverty stricken illiterate and unemployed

labourers signed a *girmit*, a colloquial of agreement, to practice law for a year in South Africa in the first instance and sailed for the new country in 1893.

This was the beginning of the saga of a common man, who, by his ability to stand up for truth and champion the cause of justice, was transformed from an ordinary man into a great man and – ultimately a Mahatma, an appellation used for the most respectable and distinguished persons in India. This transformation from Mohandas to Mahatma was full of uncertainties, sacrifices, renunciations, sufferings and humiliations yet his dauntless courage and spiritual aspirations showed him the path to success.

Gandhi's struggle to bring honour and dignity to the lives of thousands and thousands of Indians in a foreign country (South Africa) with his newly discovered weapon, *satyagraha*, the philosophy of non-violence or passive resistance, gave rise to a model of how to live life and reach self-realization. *Satyagraha* is a relentless search for truth and a determination to teach truth through nonviolent means which was to become the most powerful force in India's struggle for freedom.

General Smuts, (his biggest adversary in South Africa), later referred to the memories of those eventful years on Gandhi's seventieth birthday, ".....In jail he had prepared for me a pair of sandals which he presented to me when he was set free. I have worn those sandals for many a summer since then, even though I may feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man."

Gilbert Murray wrote about Gandhi in the Hibbert Journal of 1914:

"Persons in power should be very careful how they deal with a man who cares nothing for sensual pleasure, nothing for riches, nothing for comfort or praise or promotion, but is simply determined to do what he believes to be right. He is a dangerous and uncomfortable enemy, because his body which you can always conquer gives you so little purchase upon his soul."

Mahatma Gandhi, a great saint though at the same time an astute politician and Gurudev, an appellation given to Tagore to indicate a great preceptor, was at the same time a poet are examples and lessons for scholars who study the great debates of the 20th century between different writers, scholars, philosophers and national leaders. Naravane calls

them two banks of the same river, separated yet united and Romain Rolland, the French Noble laureate, hails them as two great minds, both moved by mutual admiration and esteem but as fatally separated in their feeling as a philosopher can be from an apostle.

They met together for the first time in Shantiniketan in February 1915. But it was not until 1919 that their correspondence would take the vital and critical form that made such a major contribution to the future growth of India, their world views and their life missions – the freedom of India for Gandhi and the unity of mankind for Tagore.

Their tributes to each other were unreserved: their differences on major political issues were fundamental. Tagore did not approve of the edges of Gandhi's thought that could be read as not progressive, though in hindsight, we are forced to wonder whether the lack of progressivism lay in Gandhi's ideas or in the perception of his contemporaries. Let us not forget that Tagore or Nehru was part of urban middle-class culture and the majority of Indians are probably not affected by that culture. Gandhi was the only one to connect with the rural India directly,

though he himself was a product of the city. Therefore there was in Gandhi a lament for the loss of culture, a savage critique of Western civilization, much more savage than in the case of Tagore.

However he was candid enough to say, 'Preservation of one's own culture does not mean contempt for that of others, but requires assimilation of the best that there may be in all the other cultures.' Similarly instead of going for a synthesis between the East and the West Tagore's theory was that there is no other way open to us in the East, but to go along with Europeanization and to go through it. This is a movement of moving beyond your narrow self. It is by stepping outside of ourselves that we can be 'saved' from ourselves and can realize the harmonious nature of the whole, or the unity of mankind. Going through does not mean acceptance but understanding everything in a larger perspective.

One can see an unfortunate tendency among modern historians to reduce the Gandhi-Tagore debate, which according to Jawaharlal Nehru was the great debate of the 20th century, into a very simplistic version, seeing it merely as a matter of superstitions versus rational thinking, or the darkness of tradition versus the enlightenment of modernity.

or East versus West, or a poet versus an ascetic. One cannot draw too neat a contrast between these two great minds because the difference was largely of degree. The western approach is primarily binary and not holistic. As a result even a person like Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winning Indian, makes a mistake but this kind of a mistake is inevitable. We go for this kind of comparison even if it sounds extremely odious.

Even Lord Bhiku Parekh, an internationally known political scientist and multi culturalist, having a deep thinking mind, misinterpreted this kind of glib understanding of the differences between Tagore and Gandhi and said that Gandhi used it as a ‘rhetorical strategy’ by calling Tagore a poet and himself a ‘humble’ man of action and thereby

i) distinguished himself fairly sharply from Tagore and at the same time ii) reduced the impact of Tagore’s criticism by warning his readers that Tagore’s judgments on matters political were not to be taken too seriously. I cannot imagine that Gandhi, who after Tagore’s death had said in his condolence message that there was hardly any public activity on which he had left no impress of his powerful personality and that he was an ‘an ardent nationalist’, would use this kind of an artifice or duplicity to lower Tagore’s

position in the public eye, showing him as just an ivory tower poet without any understanding of the world of action.

They were not ‘close friends’ but ‘had great respect for each other’. One of the best examples of this friendship was the incident of Bihar Earthquake in 1934. In reply to Gandhi’s statement about the earthquake that it was God’s chastisement for the sin of untouchability Tagore asked on 16 Feb. 1934, how could Mahatma emphasize the elements of unreason when he inducted in us freedom from fear and feebleness? I am quoting Mahatma’s reply which appeared in the same issue of the paper and for once Gandhi seemed to be more poetical than Tagore. It has a power like that of a Hebrew Psalm:

“With me the connection between cosmic phenomenon and human behaviour is a living faith that draws me nearer to my God, humbles me and makes me readier for facing Him. Such a belief would be degrading superstition, if out of the depth of my ignorance I used it for castigating my opponents.”

When severe criticism of Gandhi's statement started pouring in from different quarters Tagore could not stand it and issued a statement:

"To one really great, the real adulation as well as the cheap sneers of the mob means very little and I know Mahatmaji carries that greatness with him."

But what I feel, as Ashis Nandi also thinks, is that Gandhi by his statement was hinting at collective responsibility and that was not an exclusive conception. President Clinton publicly apologized for the sin of slavery of his country for which he was not and nor was the white community of his time was responsible. Even so Clinton apologized, being the inheritor of a culture under which, once upon a time, slavery was practiced. Ramchandra Gandhi, the grandson of Gandhi and a distinguished philosopher, with the help of the theory of action within the notion of collectivization of thought of Simone Weil, gives a positive explanation of the statement of Mahatma Gandhi on Bihar Earthquake.

In their differences also a level of decorum and gravity was maintained. In this regard one can refer to the controversial Tagore-Gandhi debate of 1921 on Charkha, hand operated spinning wheel, passive resistance and non-cooperation movement or burning of foreign clothes. Tagore was

apprehensive that passive resistance would turn violent; he thought that spinning of the wheel would not generate ideas and that our poverty was not due to our lack of sufficient thread but to our lack of vitality, our lack of unity; and that burning of clothes would hurt our economy. Gandhi called Tagore in an article in 'Young India' of 27 April 1921, 'The Great Sentinel' but defended non-cooperation movement and charkha, as a means of livelihood to many poor people and said in the end, "I found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song from Kabir. The hungry millions ask for one poem- invigorating food."

In reply to this Tagore in his speech on "Call of Truth" at the University Institute in Calcutta spoke against it. He said, "When the early bird awakens, its awakening is not merely for the purpose of looking for food. Its two untiring wings accept the call of the sky. The joy of seeing the light makes him burst out into song. The consciousness of the universal man of today calls out to our consciousness." Tagore made at least one thing clear that if romanticism was a movement for national freedom, which it turned to be, then it also accepted the universality of the enlightenment.

Mahatma Gandhi in his reply in “Young India” chose to point only to that bird which flies in the sky early in the morning and said,” But I have had the pain of watching birds who for want of strength could not be coaxed into a flutter of their wings.” In Indian romanticism, around 1920-21 and thereafter as well, the hungry bird also found its place.

Both wore their differences rather lightly and showed their love and admiration more deeply. Once Gandhi requested Tagore to spin the charkha, Tagore immediately responded, ‘you write a poem, I shall spin the wheel’.

In spite of their great love and regard for each other they had fundamental differences on some major political issues and this paradox is difficult to figure out. Even Tagore was frequently driven to his wits’ end trying to understand why Gandhi did what he did, in the first place, and moreover, why the Indian public always seemed to follow him no matter how irrational he appeared to be to his colleagues in politics and to the non-political people like Tagore but this, in no way, affected their close friendship and understanding of each other.

The best example of this is that just one year after his most powerful and comprehensive statement against the non-violent, non-cooperation movement, which came out in October 1921 in the Bengali Journal 'Prabashi,' Tagore wrote his play, 'Muktadhara' in 1922. Though a critic of the non-violent, non-cooperation movement, Tagore surprisingly gave a profound expression to his faith in the Gandhian ideal of a non-violent popular movement. The words on non-violence by the protagonist of the play, Dhananjaya, could easily be put in the mouth of Gandhi himself. When one of his followers says that he knows how to give a good beating to his adversary, Dhanjaya exhorts his followers to realize the greater power of non-beating:

“Can't you show him what non-beating is?

That needs too much strength I suppose? asks the follower
Beating the waves won't stop the storm.

But hold your rudder steady and you win.

What do you tell us to do then? Exclaims the follower
Strike at the root of violence itself.

How can that be done master?

As soon as you hold up your head and say that it does
not hurt, the roots of violence will be out”

The criticism of Raja Rammohan Roy by Gandhi created quite a stir during that era. Raja Rammohan Roy came to England in 1831 as the ambassador of the Mughal Emperor Akbar Shah II and died in 1833 in Bristol. He was initially buried in the grounds of Beech House, but ten years later his friend Dwarkanath Tagore, grandfather of Tagore, had him reinterred at Arnos Vale. A chattri (funerary monument or shrine) designed by William Prinsep and built with sponsorship from Dwarkanath Tagore was placed over the tomb. In 1997 a full size statue of Raja Ram Mohan Roy was also built at Bristol. The criticism by Gandhi was to call Raja a pygmy for thinking and writing in English. This disturbed Tagore quite a bit not so much for Gandhi's opposition to English as for calling Raja Rammohan Roy, a champion of English education, a pygmy. Gandhi retreated from his original statement -available in the collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol.xix, pp.476-78 - and published a revised version in *Young India*, now collected in Vol. xx, pp. 42-43. In this, he deleted the derogatory word 'Pygmy' but without shifting from his original stand against English education.

Tagore in a letter to C.F. Andrews from Zurich on May 10, 1921 said, The Mahatma believed Rammohan Roy was limited by his excessive familiarity with English but on the

contrary he “had the comprehensiveness of mind to be able to realise the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muhammadan and Christian cultures. Therefore he represented India in the fullness of truth, and this truth is based, not upon rejection, but on perfect comprehension. Rammohan Roy could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, not only because his education had been perfectly Eastern — he had the full inheritance of the Indian wisdom. He was never a school boy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be the friend of the West.”

Stung by the criticism Gandhi immediately published his reply in ‘Young India’ and made that famous, oft quoted statement, “I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.’

These lines are engraved in school and college buildings across the land and have recently acquired a fresh lease of life outside India. Thus, as said by Ramachandra Guha, Gandhi’s words have been cited in the debates on curriculum reform in the divided campuses of the elite

American universities. They are, now indeed, an argument-clinching *mantra* for our multicultural times.

For Tagore India was not territorial (*mrinmaya*) but ideational (*chinmaya*). He said that “I love India but my India is an idea and not a geographical expression.”

He further said that the word nation is not in our language. India has never had a real sense of western nationalism. Society is at the core of India’s civilization and politics is at the core of western civilization and hence the importance which Europe gave to freedom we gave to liberation of the soul.

Tagore replaces the ideology of nation with that of *swadeshi samaj*. When in 1904 on the suggestion by the British that Bengal should be partitioned, an upset Tagore delivered a lecture — entitled “*Swadeshi Samaj*” (‘The Union of our Homeland’ or ‘Social relations’) — and proposed an alternative solution: a self-help based comprehensive reorganization of rural Bengal. In addition, he viewed British control of India as a ‘political symptom of our social disease’ and asserted that social relations are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation as explained by Kalyan Sengupta. He always thought that society and state in India in the past moved on parallel lines without affecting

each other. An independent social *swaraj* prevailed in Indian villages which had nothing to do with state or ruling dynasties, and it was only the British-governed Indian state that tried to interfere and politicize the society, thus affecting our civilizational values.

The nation, in Tagore's view, strengthens the state at the expense of society and undermines the latter's fluidity and rich and vibrant associative life while gearing itself to the realization of a single collective purpose, such as domination, maximization of collective wealth, racial purity or some other such aim.

If one understands Tagore's view that India's unity is a social fact, not a political agenda, it becomes easy to understand that for Tagore universal nationalism is an inclusive plural concept of a nation which goes beyond the idea of exclusive nationalism and instead sees the whole earth as a family. Tagore was for 'non-parochial inclusive nationalism' relevant to humanity. It is very difficult to understand this concept, just as people found it difficult to understand how a man like Gandhi could bring freedom to a country with the help of salt and charkha as the medieval devotional poets brought a socio-religious revolution with the help of metaphors like *chadar*, bedsheet, *chunri*, scarf or seeds and earth.

Nation state for Tagore has a (i) self destructive tendency, (ii) which turns violent, (iii) snatches one's freedom, (iv) spreads a homogenized universalism and (v) makes one selfish and exclusive.

His participation in the Hindu mela for promoting indigenous goods and ideas and Hindu-Muslim unity was non-political and it continued throughout his life. From that age of 14 to his renouncing knighthood at the age of 58 (after the Jalianwala Bagh massacre where 379 unarmed people were killed and 1,137 injured at the behest of General Dyer) and even after that when, at the age of 80, he forcefully expressed anti-imperialist viewpoints in his last stirring lecture 'The Crisis in Civilization' there was no politics. In this lecture he discussed the impertinent challenge presented by the imperial ruler to our conscience. Yet even then, there was no political slant to his message.

His anti-imperial disposition sprang from a universal struggle for political justice and cultural dignity and a protest against violence which, according to him, was rooted in the notion of nation state. Indeed, it would be logical to infer that much of the cause of human grief, pain and humiliation in the 20th Century, can be attributed to the conflicting claims of nation states. Far from acting as an instrument for realizing

collective or communitarian aspirations and welfare, exclusive nationalism has tragically led to collective despair. Along with nationalism, patriotism is also based on the nation state; it demands uncritical loyalty to the state even when it engages in criminal activities - as happened in Nazi Germany. For Tagore, love of one's country is not to be focused on the state but on the well-being of one's fellow members consistent with due regard for that of the wider humanity.

Hence for Tagore the nonexclusive and active love of the members of one's community could and should give new orientation to our understanding of nationalism and patriotism.

Gandhi broadly shared Tagore views. For him too, the stronger the society, the less it needed to rely on the state to maintain its unity and stability. For both, a country is the creation of its citizens and becomes theirs when, and to the extent that they identify with and care for each other. The Modern civilization undermines this unity, fragmenting and dehumanizing the individual and forcing him to rely heavily on the coercive institution of the state.

However, Gandhi was definitely more practical than Tagore and wanted people to concentrate their attention and energy on their country first and thereafter on humankind at large.

Gandhi's road map was from nationalism to internationalism, while for Tagore both were to be accepted as a single unit. Gandhi said, "It is impossible to be internationalist without being a nationalist ... i.e. when peoples belonging to different countries have organised themselves and are able to act as one man." Whereas Tagore said, "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history. And India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulation of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other."

We can only hope for a world without boundaries as envisaged by Tagore and live with our heads held high in the meantime. But it does look like a distant dream.

The difference between them thus lay in their different attitudes to life.

Tagore, referring to the first mantra/couplet of 'Isopanishad', would always say, 'rejoice and renounce'. W.B. Yeats, therefore, made a comment about Tagore that he was the only saint who did not refuse to live. This is diametrically opposite to what Gandhi said to an English

journalist when asked to give, in five words, the meaning of life, Gandhi said, 'Why five? I will give it you in three words', 'renounce and rejoice'. For Gandhi morality formed the substance of the good life and beauty was to be defined and judged in moral terms; Tagore took the opposite view and saw morality as a form of beauty. His words were, 'Beauty meant harmony, peace, *ananda* i.e. bliss and morality was about finding blissfulness in living at peace and in harmony with one's fellow men.'

Both were highly concerned for each other in spite of their differences on fundamental issues. In Pune, in Yerveda jail in 1933, when Gandhi vowed to fast unto death against British Prime Minister Ramsey McDonald's communal award Tagore was extremely disturbed on hearing about Gandhi's failing health - so much so that he could not stay back and came all the way to Pune from Shantiniketan after sending his protest telegrams to the Viceroy and also to the British Prime Minister. When he reached the jail the news came about the Government's withdrawal of the award. As Tagore reached the prison room he found Kasturba, Gandhi's wife and many others present in the room. It was a day of silence for Gandhi. He wrote on a piece of paper to Tagore asking him to sing a song of his own while he was offered a glass of orange juice. Tagore

sang his famous song – ‘*jivana jakhono sukaey jai*’, ‘when the life dries up, come like the flow of compassion to fill our lives.’

But perhaps we have yet to realize that they were two great lonely men, as said by R.K. Dasgupta, in spite of their tremendous popularity, and that they clashed on some principles because they placed truth above everything else and in this they were always in close agreement. Both had the courage and spirit to speak alone and walk alone. It is not astonishing that because of this Gandhi loved particularly one of the songs of Tagore.

“If they answer not to thy call walk alone.
If they are afraid and cover mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
Open thy mind and speak alone.”

When Arthur Gedde’s translation of it ‘March Alone! Stand Alone!’ was presented during the Tagore centenary celebrations in 1961 in Edinburgh his Scots friends exclaimed, “But that’s a Scottish bagpipe march with a Scottish snap and beat.”

There is no doubt that at times the two were found to be miles apart from each other but at the same time it was also the spirit of truth, which made them collaborators in a common task and in this their minds were equal.

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